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The Free Life

by

Woodrow Wilson

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UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA

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Publishers' Note

THE Free Life, based upon a baccalaureate address delivered by President Wilson at Princeton University during his presidency of that institution, was first published in 1908. This new edition is issued in view of the present widespread interest in every utterance, spoken or written, of our leading American citizen, scholar, and statesman.

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"And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." Rom. xii: 2

The Free Life

THE college graduate almost always thinks of himself as just about to begin life. There is a great deal that is false and merely conventional in the thought. He has been in the midst of life twenty years and more, and every year has added to the intimacy and the variety of his contact with the persons and the circumstances that lay about him. Particularly after he entered college he must have been aware that earlier trammels and safeguards had fallen away and that he was put upon his mettle as a man to win a place and make a career. What happens to him at graduation is no sudden or violent thing. The

scene will only slowly widen about him as hitherto.

Of course it is true in respect of most young men that the paths they have trod in their years of tutelage have been sheltered and private ways such as thoughtful love has prepared, generation after generation, for the feet of the boys who are to be nurtured and trained for the work of their years of independence and maturity. I pity the man who cannot look back to those delicious sequestered places from which we first saw the world, that dear covert made by mothers' and fathers' love and kept inviolable by all the gentle arts of guardian care. What free spaces there were for play and all light-hearted sport! How generously long those golden days seemed, and with what gracious figures they were filled, of knights and fairies and heroes who seemed our very comrades! How slowly the years moved,

and how good it was that they were long and full of dreams!

The years presently quickened their pace, you remember, and when we became schoolboys the world grew more definite about us: there were fewer dreams and more realities. But the paths were still sheltered and delightful. There was no anxious shifting for ourselves: the plan of our days was made for us. They were still free days, made for sport and pleasure. School hours and study only gave zest to play and to all the unchartered liberties of the mind. We did not come upon short days and engrossing tasks and the feeling that work was the veritable master in all things until we got to college; and even there we kept, perhaps kept too long, the spirit of boys, and made the work as much as might be an incident still, and not an occupation.

In a very real sense, therefore, you

are at the threshold of the life which is to mean constant and independent endeavor, the actual making of the careers you have been looking forward to; and this is the day, the very sacred day of special counsel, when we ask ourselves what chart and mode of life we have found by which to determine and make safe our course of life henceforth, by which to make sure of hope and courage to sustain us as we break up these dear comradeships, leave a little world that has known us, and severally seek places for ourselves among strangers. The text of Scripture that has seemed to come most directly to meet my thought as I pondered this turning-point in your life is that which is contained in certain words to be found in the second verse of the twelfth chapter of Romans: "Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may

prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."

It may seem strange and futile counsel to give to a company of young men who are about to go out into the world to ask a living of it—a chance to serve it, to partake of its life and of its rewards—to tell them that they must not conform to what they find, must not accept the rules of the life they enter as novices, by permission and not by right, which they enter as those who would learn and not as those who would teach. Their advice will neither be asked nor accepted, and they will be laughed at for their pains if they offer it. But the counsel of the words I have quoted is no counsel of presumption. It is a mere counsel of integrity. The "world" is no fixed thing or order of life that stands unchanged from generation to generation, or even from day to day. Its habit and practice change with every generation

that rules it, and your generation is to come, one of these days, upon its years of rule. Have you anything in your hearts which will distinguish you from the common run of men who lose themselves in the mass and never emerge again carrying any light of their own?

"Be not conformed to this world," —this world that is always changing, that is never sure that it sees any fixed points or stands upon any lasting foundation. You have been given an opportunity to get the offing and perspective of books, of the truths which are of no age, but run unbroken and unaltered throughout the changeful life of all ages. You know the long measurements, the high laws, by which the world's progress has ever been gauged and assessed,—laws of sound thinking and pure motive which seem to lie apart in calm regions which passion cannot disturb, into whose pure air wan-

der no mists or confusions or threats of storm. Amidst every altered aspect of time and circumstance the human heart has remained unchanged. No doubt there were simpler ages, when the things which now perplex us in hope and conduct seemed very plain. If life confuses us now, no doubt it is because we do not see it simply and see it whole. Look back more often and you shall find your vision adjusted for the look ahead.

Reflections like these seem to me to spring naturally to the thought out of the words of Scripture counsel I have read. "Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind,"—by that simplification of motive and of standard which is a return to a sort of youth and naturalness of thought drawn out of those only fountains of perpetual youth, the fountains of just thought and true feeling. At them, and only at them, do you get

a veritable and constant renewal of your minds: the refreshment which brings back the taste for all things sweet and primitive in their truth. These fountains have always lain about you,—when you were children, when you were growing youths, since you became men with open eyes, here in college.

Some of them are the fountains of learning, which have here been so accessible to you. If their waters have not tasted pure and sweet to you, with a tang of the wholesome earth that renews all things, it is because you have drunk of them neither often enough nor copiously enough to wash the dust of the common road from your palates. Learning is knowledge purged of all that is untested and ephemeral. It is neither the rumour of the street nor the talk of the shop nor the conjecture of the salon. It has been purified and sifted in quiet rooms to which pass-

ing fashions of thought do not penetrate. It has passed through mind after mind like water through the untainted depths of the earth, and springs to the places of its revelation, not a thing of the surface, but a thing from within where the sources of thought lie. Men come and go, but these things abide, like the face of the heavens. Age is linked with age by the permanence of the physical universe and the unchanging nature of the human spirit. Hearts are ever the same, whatever the setting of the stage or the plot of the play.

And so the fountains of learning become the fountains of perpetual youth. At them are our minds renewed; at them do we drink of the pure waters undefiled whose sources lie below all circumstance, all accident, all surface temperature or season. After we have tasted of them much of the talk of the day seems

like the mere lees of cheap wine, of the vintage of yesterday. We are renewed by learning in the sense that our minds are, as it were, brought back to the originals and first bases of thought, to direct communion with all that is primitive and permanent and beyond analysis or conjecture: as our manners are renewed—that is, simplified—when social convention and all mere fashion falls away in the presence of danger, of sincere, unselfish love, and of all pure passion; as our lungs are renewed by the pure, untainted air of free uplands or by the keen breath of the wind that comes out of the hills. Learning has come into the world, not merely to clear men's eyes and give them mastery over nature and human circumstance, but also to keep them young, never staled, always new, like the stars and the hills and the sea and the vagrant winds, which make nothing of times

or occasions, but live always in serene freedom from any touch of decay, the sources of their being some high law which we cannot disturb.

But the fountains of learning are not the only fountains of perpetual youth and renewal. There are other springs of the spirit which, like the springs of learning, renew us from age to age in all our spiritual qualities, which hold us to the originals of all that is fresh and enjoyable in the life from which we draw our strength. There are the fountains of friendship, copious, free, inexhaustible, confined to no time or region or season. Do we not know them? Do they not abound in this place? Whether we have resorted to the fountains of learning or not, though we may have neglected them in our folly, we have known the refreshment of these other sources of renewal, these sweet fountains of friendship,—have drunk of them al-

most to intoxication here in this place of comradeships. I hope that we have drunk of them with comprehending hearts, perceiving the true and excellent quality of the sweet waters we quaffed. If pure and taken with pure lips, they will have given us taste of unselfishness and self-sacrifice. That is not true friendship which proceeds merely from the action of a self-pleasing taste, which is nothing more than a self-indulgent pleasure. It is very delightful to consort with companions who gratify our zest for good fellowship, amuse us with gay talk and entertaining jest, walk our own familiar ways of thought and feeling, welcome our coming and never bore us; who, if dull, are dull to our liking, of the quality of dullness that rests and reassures us. But friendship is a much larger, much finer, much deeper thing, than this mere relish of good company. It is a great deal

more than mere congenial companionship. Let true and deep affection once grip you; let interest and pleasure once deepen into insight and sympathy and a sense of vital kinship of mind and spirit, and the relationship takes on an energy and a poignancy you had not dreamed of in your easy search for pleasure. Spirit leaps to spirit with a new understanding, a new eagerness, a new desire: and then you may make proof whether it be true friendship or not by the quick and certain test whether you love yourself or your friend more at any moment of divided interest.

True friendship is of a royal lineage. It is of the same kith and breeding as loyalty and self-forgetting devotion, and proceeds upon a higher principle even than they. For loyalty may be blind, and friendship must not be; devotion may sacrifice principles of right choice which friend-

ship must guard with an excellent and watchful care. You must act in your friend's interest whether it please him or not: the object of love is to serve, not to win. It is a hard saying, I know;—who shall be pure enough to receive it? There is but one presence in which it can be made plain and acceptable, and that is the presence of Christ, where it may stand revealed in the light of that example which makes all duty to shine with the face of privilege and of exalted joy.

Here are the fountains of real renewal. I suppose that we can speak of our minds as indeed renewed when they are carried back in vivid consciousness to some first and primal standard of thought and duty; to images which seem to issue direct from the God and Father of our spirits, fresh with immediate creation, clear as if they had the light of the first morning upon them,—as

those who go back to the very springs of being. It is thus of necessity that our renewal comes through love, through pure motive, through intimate contact with whatever reminds us of what is permanent and forever real, whether we taste it in the fountains of learning, of friendship, or of divine example, the crown alike of friendship and of truth.

To one deep fountain of revelation and renewal few of you, I take it for granted, have had access yet,—I mean the fountain of sorrow, a fountain sweet or bitter according as it is drunk in submission or in rebellion, in love or in resentment and deep dismay. I will not tell you of these waters; if you have not tasted them, it would be futile,—and some of you will understand without word of mine. I can only beg that when they are put to your lips, as they must be, you will drink of them as those who seek renewal and know

how to make of sadness a mood of enlightenment and of hope.

You will see that I but go about to elucidate a single theme: that all individual human life is a struggle, when rightly understood and conducted, against yielding in weak accommodation to the changeful, temporary, ephemeral things about us, in order that we may catch that permanent, authentic tone of life which is the voice of the Spirit of God,—

"A presence that disturbs us with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things."

It is not a thing remote, obscure, poetical, but a very real thing, that

lives in the consciousness of every one of us. Every thoughtful man, every man not merely of vagrant mind, has been aware, not once, but many times, of some unconquerable spirit that he calls himself, which is struggling against being overborne by circumstance, against being forced into conformity with things his heart is not in, things which seem to deaden him and deprive him of his natural independence and integrity, so that his individuality is lost and merged in some common, undistinguishable mass, the nameless multitudes of a world that ceaselessly shifts and alters and is never twice the same. He feels instinctively that the only victory lies in nonconformity. He must adjust himself to these things that come and go and have no base or principle, but he must not be subdued by them or lose his own clear lines of chosen action.

The college man, particularly if, while he studied, he has lived as we live here, where the world is reproduced in small, with its comradeships and rivalries and organizations, its social compulsions and its voluntary efforts of individuals and of societies, is entitled to think that he can distinguish the permanent from the ephemeral, determine what he will ignore, what accept. He should have learned that nonconformity is not antagonism; that he is not undertaking the impossible and ridiculous task of rebuking and reconstructing a world established and independent of him; that what he is attempting is what I may term an influential nonconformity, which adds a new item of force to the world, —adds a man who thinks for himself, a man renewed by fresh contact with the sources and originals of thought and inspiration, and ready to give the world just that occa-

sional thrill of reminder which keeps the breath of progress and of renewal in its nostrils. The world always responds to the impulse when it finds an authentic man, whom it cannot crush or ignore, who speaks always words of his own, and yet who flings no foolish defiance to his generation, is ready for all generous coöperation, is an eager servant of his day and time, not its opponent or critic of destruction, — just a self-respecting, thoughtful, unconquerable human spirit.

"Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind." This transformation is no apotheosis, it is no changing of men into angels, no transmutation of common flesh into stuff of immortality. It is a transformation effected by the renewing of your minds, a transformation of attitude and motive, of purpose, of point of view. It is the transformation effected in

the spirit itself by seeing the world as a work of God, in its largeness and entirety, contained in no single generation, lasting, a thing of spirit, from age to age, from friendship to friendship, from love to love; knit together of human beings, spirits great and small, inspired and paltry, lifted or debased by victory or defeat in a continual struggle to see and receive the truth; a mode of energy serene, augmenting, persistent. Every great thought and principle works its transformation upon the spirits of those who receive it, and a mind renewed is a mind transformed.

The university has been a place of transformation for you, whether you willed it to be or not: the question is only in how great a degree you have been transformed. You are not what you were when you came here: you cannot have escaped some wider view of men and of truth and of circumstance and of nature than you

had when you came here unformed boys; and for some of you the transformation has been complete. You neither think nor purpose as you did before the processes of our teaching and our life wrought upon you; and now you are about to have occasion to show how vital the process has been.

The transformed university man, whose thought and will have been in fact renewed out of the sources of knowledge and of love, is one of the great dynamic forces of the world. We live in an age disturbed, confused, bewildered, afraid of its own forces, in search not merely of its road, but even of its direction. There are many voices of counsel, but few voices of vision; there is much excitement and feverish activity, but little concert of thoughtful purpose. We are distressed by our own ungoverned, undirected energies and do many things, but no-

thing long. It is our duty to find ourselves. It is our privilege to be calm and know that the truth has not changed, that old wisdom is more to be desired than any new nostrum, that we must neither run with the crowd nor deride it, but seek sober counsel for it and for ourselves.

Our true wisdom is in our ideals. Practical judgments shift from age to age, but principles abide; and more stable even than principles are the motives which simplify and ennoble life. That, I suppose, is why the image of Christ has grown, not less, but more distinct in the consciousness of the race since the tragic day in which He died upon the cross. How unlike in every external circumstance was that day to our own; how the world has changed and shifted in every institution and every circumstance since the day when all men were provincials of Rome; and yet there has been no

age to which Christ did not seem to belong as truly and intimately as he belonged to the world in which Palestine was property of imperial Rome, and Joseph and Mary obscure subjects of the Caesar. He is the only permanent person of history, the only being who was of no age because he was of all, the only complete and unalterable epitome of what man is and what man would be, a creature of two worlds, the world that changes and the world that changes not,—the world where spirit but struggles for recognition, and the world in which spirit is released to know its own freedom and perfection. How the task of renewal and transformation is simplified for us by his person and example, so clear to our vision, so easy to be understood, so dear to every right instinct in us,—our divine kinsman, to whom our spirits yearn whenever stirred by pain or hope!

And if Christ is adjusted to all ages, he is conformed to none: He is the only true citizen of the world. There is in him constant renewal, the fresh, undying quality that draws always direct from the sources of knowledge and of conduct. He interprets —only He can perfectly interpret— our text. His is the nonconformity of the perfect individual, unsophisticated, unstaled, unsubdued. His is the perfect learning distilled into wisdom, the perfect friendship lifted to the utter heights of self-sacrifice, the perfect sorrow steeped in hope, which keep his mind and spirit naïf, spontaneous, creative, the cause, not the result, of circumstance. Not all the hoarded counsel of the world is worth the example of a single person: it is abstract, intangible until incarnated; and here, incarnate, is the man Christ who in his own life and person shows us and all the world "what is that good, and ac

ceptable, and perfect, will of God" which would have us see in the face of all knowledge, of all love, of all experience, the long lines of light which illuminate the meaning of our lives,—lines that blaze unbroken out of the elder ages that have gone and sweep past us into the mysterious days whither we go, from which, one by one, we draw the veil away. In an ancient place of learning we stand where generations meet and merge, where ages render their common reckoning; and the teaching of a university with regard to the long processes of human life should be the same as the Master's: that every soul that is truly to live must be born again, must come fresh into its own age with the spirit of immortality—which is the spirit of eternal youth—upon it, the brightness of another morning of creation about it, the dayspring from on high. "Be not conformed to this world:

but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind: that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" which is without date or age or end and which gives to every one of us a like immortal youth and liberty and power.

I have tried to give you in these parting words, on this solemn day, some glimpse of spiritual things. I hope the words have not been too mystical, too remote from the vocabulary of what we ordinarily think and say. We have gone a happy journey of four years together. Our comradeship has not depended upon an actual personal acquaintance with one another. Nothing happens here that does not happen to all of us: there is no current of our lives which we do not all feel. We have had much counsel together. Though you hand your function of counsel on to-day to those who are to succeed you, you

must know that you will leave much behind you that is your permanent contribution of love to the growth and wholesomeness of the place. And you can never be spiritually severed from your Alma Mater. Some part of her will always live in you.

And it is just that fact which I wish might be interpreted to you and, through you, to all the world. This place is but a material image that changes from age to age: the real university is a spirit which goes with you, as it stays with us,—the spirit of learning, which is always young and which does not conform to this world; the spirit of friendship, which unlocks the secret of loyalty and of self-sacrifice; the spirit which seeks intimate contact with the springs of motive, and which lifts us into the presence of Christ.

It is a solemn thing to look one another for the last time in the eyes,

to grasp hands and say farewell; but we do not in fact break company if we have indeed been linked in spirit. Be brave; walk with open and uplifted eyes; let neither hardship nor sorrow touch you with dismay. Nothing but our own weakness can taint the integrity of manly candour and simple uprightness. God send you stout hearts in all weather. Our love and our faith shall follow you. We pledge you with all good cheer for the long journey, and pray God we shall all meet at home at its end.

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